THE WITCHER

– ENHANCED EDITION –

„THE WITCHER”

A story by Andrzej Sapkowski

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by Andrzej Sapkowski

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I

Later, it was said the man came from the north, from Ropers Gate. He came on foot, leading his laden horse by the bridle. It was late afternoon and the ropers', saddlers' and tanners' stalls were already closed, the street empty. It was hot but the man had a black coat thrown over his shoulders. He drew attention to himself.

He stopped in front of the Old Narakort Inn, stood there for a moment, listened to the hubbub of voices. As usual, at this hour, it was full of people.

The stranger did not enter the Old Narakort. He pulled his horse further down the street to another tavern, a smaller one, called The Fox. Not enjoying the best of reputations, it was almost empty.

The innkeeper raised his head above a barrel of pickled cucum- bers and measured the man with his gaze. The outsider, still in his coat, stood stiffly in front of the counter, motionless and silent.

'What will it be?'

'Beer,' said the stranger. His voice was unpleasant. The innkeeper wiped his hands on his canvas apron and filled a chipped earthenware tankard.

The stranger was not old but his hair was almost entirely white. Beneath his coat he wore a worn leather jerkin laced up at the neck and shoulders.

As he took off his coat those around him noticed that he carried a sword – not something unusual in itself, nearly every man in Wyzim carried a weapon – but no one carried a sword strapped to his back as if it were a bow or a quiver.

The stranger did not sit at the table with the few other guests. He remained standing at the counter, piercing the innkeeper with his gaze. He drew from the tankard.

'I'm looking for a room for the night.'

'There's none,' grunted the innkeeper, looking at the guest's boots, dusty and dirty. 'Ask at the Old Narakort.'

'I would rather stay here.'

'There is none.' The innkeeper finally recognised the stranger's accent. He was Rivian.

'I'll pay.' The outsider spoke quietly, as if unsure, and the whole nasty affair began. A pockmarked beanpole of a man who, from the moment the outsider had entered had not taken his gloomy eyes from him, got up and approached the counter. Two of his companions rose behind him, no more than two paces away.

'There's no room to be had, you Rivian vagabond,' rasped the pockmarked man, standing right next to the outsider. 'We don't need people like you in Wyzim. This is a decent town!'

The outsider took his tankard and moved away. He glanced at the innkeeper, who avoided his eyes. It did not even occur to him to defend the Rivian. After all, who liked Rivians?

'All Rivians are thieves,' the pock-marked man went on, his breath smelling of beer, garlic and anger. 'Do you hear me, you bastard?'

'He can't hear you. His ears are full of shit,' said one of the men with him, and the second man cackled.

'Pay and leave!' yelled the pocked man. Only now did the Rivian look at him. 'I'll finish my beer.'

'We'll give you a hand,' the pockmarked man hissed. He knocked the tankard from the stranger's hand and simultaneously grabbing him by the shoulder, dug his fingers into the leather strap which ran diagonally across the outsider's chest. One of the men behind him raised a fist to strike. The outsider curled up on the spot, throwing the pockmarked man off balance. The sword hissed in its sheath and glistened briefly in the dim light. The place seethed. There was a scream, and one of the few remaining customers tumbled towards the exit. A chair fell with a crash and earthenware smacked hollowly against the floor. The innkeeper, his lips trembling, looked at the horribly slashed face of the pocked man, who, clinging with his fingers to the edge of the counter, was slowly sinking from sight. The other two were lying on the floor, one motionless, the other writhing and convulsing in a dark, spreading puddle. A woman's hysterical scream vibrated in the air, piercing the ears as the innkeeper shuddered, caught his breath, and vomited.

The stranger retreated towards the wall, tense and alert. He held the sword in both hands, sweeping the blade through the air. No one moved. Terror, like cold mud, was clear on their faces, paralysing limbs and blocking throats.

Three guards rushed into the tavern with thuds and clangs. They must have been close by. They had truncheons wound with leather straps at the ready, but at the sight of the corpses, drew their swords. The Rivian pressed his back against the wall and, with his left hand, pulled a dagger from his boot.

'Throw that down!' one of the guards yelled with a trembling voice. 'Throw that down, you thug! You're coming with us!'

The second guard kicked aside the table between himself and the Rivian.

'Go get the men, Treska!' he shouted to the third guard, who had stayed closer to the door.

'No need,' said the stranger, lowering his sword. 'I'll come by myself.'

'You'll go, you son of a bitch, on the end of a rope!' yelled the trembling guard. 'Throw that sword down or I'll smash your head in!'

The Rivian straightened. He quickly pinned his blade under his left arm and with his right hand raised towards the guards, swiftly drew a complicated sign in the air. The clout-nails which studded his tunic from his wrists to elbows flashed.

The guards drew back, shielding their faces with their arms. One of the customers sprang up while another darted to the door. The woman screamed again, wild and ear-splitting.

'I'll come by myself,' repeated the stranger in his resounding, metallic voice. 'And the three of you will go in front of me. Take me to the castellan. I don't know the way.'

'Yes, sir,' mumbled the guard, dropping his head. He made towards the exit, looking around tentatively. The other two guards followed him out backwards, hastily. The stranger followed in their tracks, sheathing his sword and dagger. As they passed the tables the remaining customers hid their faces from the dangerous stranger.

II

Velerad, castellan of Wyzim, scratched his chin. He was neither superstitious nor faint-hearted but he did not relish the thought of being alone with the white-haired man. At last he made up his mind.

'Leave,' he ordered the guards. 'And you, sit down. No, not there. Further away, if you please.'

The stranger sat down. He no longer carried his sword or black coat.

'I am Velerad, castellan of Wyzim,' said Velerad, toying with a heavy mace lying on the table. 'And I'm listening. What do you have to say to me, you brigand, before you are thrown into the dungeon? Three killed and an attempted spell-casting; not bad, not bad at all. Men are impaled for such things in Wyzim. But I'm a just man, so I will listen to you, before you are executed. Speak.'

The Rivian unbuttoned his jerkin and pulled out a wad of white goat leather.

'You nail this crossways, in taverns,' he said quietly. 'Is what's written here true?'

'Ah. 'Velerad grunted, looking at the runes etched into the leather.

'So that's it. And I didn't guess at once. Yes, it's true. It's signed by Foltest, King of Temeria, Pontar and Mahakam, which.makes it true. A proclamation is a proclamation, witcher, but law is law – and I take care of law and order in Wyzim. I will not allow people to be murdered! Do you understand?'

The Rivian nodded to show he understood. Velerad snorted with anger.

'You carry the witcher's emblem?' The stranger reached into his jerkin once more and pulled out a round medallion on a silver chain. It pictured the head of a wolf, baring its fangs. 'And do you have a name? Any name will do, it's simply to make con- versation easier.'

'My name is Geralt.'

'Geralt, then. Of Rivia I gather, from your accent?' 'Of Rivia.'

'Right. Do you know what, Geralt? This,' Velerad slapped the proclamation, 'let it go. It's a serious matter. Many have tried and failed already. This, my friend, is not the same as roughing up a couple of scoundrels.'

'I know. This is my job, Velerad. And that proclamation offers a three thousand oren reward.'

'Three thousand,' Velerad scowled. 'And the princess as a wife, or so rumour says, although gracious Foltest has not proclaimed that.'

'I'm not interested in the princess,' Geralt said calmly. He was sitting motionless, his hands on his knees. 'Just in the three thousand.'

'What times,' sighed the castellan. 'What foul times! Twenty years ago who would have thought, even in a drunken stupour, that such a profession as a witcher would exist? Itinerant killers of basilisks; travelling slayers of dragons and vodniks! Tell me, Geralt, are you allowed beer in your guild?'

'Certainly.' Velerad clapped his hands.

'Beer!' he called. 'And sit closer, Geralt. What do I care?' The beer, when it arrived, was cold and frothy.

'Foul times,' Velerod muttered, drinking deep from his tankard. 'All sorts of filth has sprung up. Mahakam, in the mountains, is teeming with bogeymen. In the past it was just wolves howling in the woods, but now it's kobolds and spriggans wherever you spit, werewolves or some other vermin. Fairies and rusalkas snatch children from villages by the hundreds. We have diseases never heard of before; it makes my hair stand on end. And now, to top it all, this!' He pushed the wad of leather back across the table. 'It's not surprising, Geralt, that you witchers' services are in demand.'

'The king's proclamation, castellan,' Geralt raised his head. 'Do you know the details?'

Velerad leant back in his chair, locked his hands over his stomach.

'The details? Yes, I know them. Not first-hand perhaps, but from a good source.'

'That's what I want.'

‘If you insist, then listen. ’Velerad drank some beer and lowered his voice. ‘During the reign of old Medell, his father, when our gracious king was still a prince, Foltest showed us what he was capable of, and he was capable of a great deal. We hoped he would grow out of it. But shortly after his coronation Foltest surpassed himself, jaw-droppingly: he got his own sister with child. Adda was younger and they were always together, but nobody suspected anything except, perhaps, the queen . . . To get to the point: suddenly there is Adda with a huge belly, and Foltest talking about getting wed to his sister. The situation was made even more tense because Vizimir of Novigrad wanted his daughter, Dalka, to marry Foltest and had already sent out his envoys. We had to restrain Foltest from insulting them, and lucky we did, or Vizimir would have torn our insides out. Then, not without Adda’s help – for she influenced her brother – we managed to dissuade the boy from a quick wedding.

‘Well, then Adda gave birth. And now listen, because this is where it all starts. Only a few saw what she bore, but one midwife jumped from the tower window to her death and the other lost her senses and remains dazed to this day. So I gather that the royal bastard – a girl – was not comely, and she died immediately.

No one was in a hurry to tie the umbilical cord. Nor did Adda, to her good fortune, survive the birth.

‘But then Foltest stepped in again. Wisdom dictated that the royal bastard should have been burned or buried in the wilderness. Instead, on the orders of our gracious king, she was laid to rest in a sarcophagus in the vaults beneath the palace.’

‘It’s too late for your wisdom now.’ Geralt raised his head. ‘One of the Knowing Ones should have been sent for.’

‘You mean those charlatans with stars on their hats? Of course. About ten of them came running later, when it became known what lay in the sarcophagus. And what scrambled out of it at night. Though it didn’t start manifesting straight away. Oh, no. For seven years after the funeral there

was peace. Then one night – it was a full moon – there were screams in the palace, shouting and commotion! I don't have to tell you, this is your trade and you've read the proclamation. The infant had grown in the coffin – and how! – grown to have incredible teeth! In a word, she became a striga.

'Pity you didn't see the corpses, as I did. Had you, you'd have taken a great detour to avoid Wyzim.'

Geralt was silent.

'Then, as I was saying,' Velerad continued, 'Foltest summoned a whole crowd of sorcerers. They all jabbered at the same time and almost came to blows with those staffs they carry – to beat off the dogs, no doubt, once they've been set loose on them. And I think they regularly are. I'm sorry, Geralt, if you have a different opinion of wizards. No doubt you do, in your profession, but to me they are swindlers and fools. You witchers inspire greater confidence in men. At least you are more straightforward.'

Geralt smiled, but didn't comment.

'But, to the point.' The castellan peered into his tankard and poured more beer for himself and the Rivian. 'Some of the sorcerers' advice didn't seem so stupid. One suggested burning the striga together with the palace and the sarcophagus. Another advised chopping her head off. The rest were keen on driving aspen stakes into her body during the day, when the she-devil was asleep in her coffin, worn out by her night's delights. Unfortunately one, a jester with a pointed hat and a bald pate, a hunch-backed hermit, argued it was magic: the spell could be undone and the striga would turn into Foltest's little daughter, as pretty as a picture. Someone simply had to stay in the crypt throughout the night, and that would be that. After which – can you imagine such a fool? – he went to the palace for the night. Little of him was left in the morning, only, I believe, his hat and stick. But Foltest clung to his idea like a burr to a dog's tail. He forbade any attempt to kill the striga and brought in charlatans from all corners of Wyzim to reverse the spell and turn her into a princess. What colourful company! Twisted women, cripples, dirty and louse- ridden. It was pitiful.

'They went ahead and cast spells – mainly over a bowl and tankard. Of course some were quickly exposed as frauds by Foltest or the council. A few were even hung on the palisades, but not enough of them. I would have hung them all. I don't suppose I have to say that the striga, in the meantime, was getting her teeth into all sorts of people every now and again and paying no attention to the fraudsters and their spells. Or that Foltest was no longer living in the palace. No one lived there anymore.'

Velerad paused, drank some beer, and the witcher waited in silence.

'And so it's been for seven years, Geralt, because she was born around fourteen years ago. We've had a few other worries, like war with Vizimir of Novigrad – fought for real, understandable reasons – over the border posts, not for some princess or marriage alliance. Foltest sporadically hints at marriage and looks over portraits from neighbouring courts, which he then throws down the privy. And every now and then this mania seizes hold of him again, and he sends horsemen out to look for new sorcerers. His promised reward, the three thousand, has attracted any number of cranks, stray knights, even a shepherd known throughout the whole region as a cretin, may he rest in peace. But the striga is still doing well. Every now and again she gets her teeth into someone. You get used to it. And at least those heroes trying to reverse the spell have a use – the beast stuffs herself on the spot and doesn't roam beyond her palace. Foltest has a new palace, of course, quite a fine one.'

'In seven years,' Geralt raised his head, 'in seven years, no one has settled the matter?'

'Well, no.' Velerad's gaze penetrated the witcher. 'Because the matter can't be settled. We have to come to terms with it, especially Foltest, our gracious and beloved ruler, who will keep nailing these proclamations up at crossroads. Although there are fewer volunteers now. There was one recently, but he insisted on the three thousand in advance. So we put him in a sack and threw him in the lake.'

'There is still no shortage of fraudsters then.'

'No, far from it, 'the castellan agreed without taking his eyes off the witcher. 'That's why you mustn't demand gold in advance when you go to the palace. If you go.'

'I'll go.'

'It's up to you. But remember my advice. As we're talking of the reward, there has been word recently about the second part of it. I mentioned it to you: the princess for a wife. I don't know who made it up, but if the striga looks the way they say then it's an exceptionally grim joke. Nevertheless there's been no lack of fools racing to the palace for the chance of joining the royal family. Two apprentice shoemakers, to be precise. Why are shoemakers so foolish, Geralt?'

'I don't know. And witchers, castellan? Have they tried?'

'There were a few. But when they heard the spell was to be lifted and the striga wasn't to be killed they mostly shrugged and left. That's one of the reasons why my esteem for witchers has grown, Geralt. And one came along, younger than you – I forget his name, if he gave it at all. He tried.'

'And?'

'The fanged princess spread his entrails over a considerable distance.'

Geralt nodded.

'That was all of them?'

'There was one other.'

Velerad remained silent for a while, and the witcher didn't urge him on.

'Yes,' the castellan said finally.

'There was one more.

At first, when Foltest threatened him with the noose if he killed or harmed the striga, he laughed and started packing his belongings. But then...'

Velerad leaned across the table, lowered his voice to almost a whisper. '...then he undertook the task. You see, Geralt, there are some wise men in Wyzim, in high positions, who've had enough of this whole affair. Rumour has it these men persuaded the witcher, in secret, not to fuss around

with spells but to batter the striga to death and tell the king the spell had failed, that his dear daughter had been killed in self-defence – an accident at work. The king, of course, would be furious and refuse to pay an oren in reward. But that would be an end to it. The witty witcher replied we could chase strigas ourselves for nothing. Well, what could we do? We collected money, bargained... but nothing came of it.'

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

'Nothing,' repeated Velerad. 'The witcher didn't want to try that first night. He trudged around, lay in wait, wandered about the neighbourhood. Finally, they say, he saw the striga in action, as she does not clamber from her crypt just to stretch her legs. He saw her and scarpered that night. Without a word.'

Geralt's expression changed a little, in what was probably supposed to be a smile.

'Those wise men,' he said, 'they still have the money, no doubt? Witchers don't take payment in advance.'

'No doubt they still do,' said Velerad.

'Does the rumour say how much they offer?'

Velerad bared his teeth in a smile. 'Some say eight hundred...

'Geralt shook his head.

'Others,' murmured the castellan, 'talk of a thousand.'

'Not much when you bear in mind that rumour likes to exaggerate. And the king is offering three thousand.'

'Don't forget about the betrothal,' Velerad mocked. 'What are you talking about? It's obvious you won't get the three thousand.'

'How's it obvious?'

Velerad thumped the table.

'Geralt, do not spoil my impression of witchers! This has been going on for more than seven years! The striga is finishing off up to fifty people a year, fewer now people are avoiding the palace. Oh no, my friend, I believe in magic. I've seen a great deal and I believe, to a certain extent, in

the abilities of wizards and witchers. But all this nonsense about lifting the spell was made up by a hunch-backed, snotty old man who'd lost his mind on his hermit's diet. It's nonsense which no one but Foltest believes. Adda gave birth to a striga because she slept with her brother. That is the truth, and no spell will help. Now the striga devours people – as strigas do – she has to be killed, and that is that. Listen: two years ago peasants from some God-forsaken hole near Mahakam were plagued by a dragon devouring their sheep. They set out together, battered the dragon to death with stanchions, and did not even think it worth boasting about. But we in Wyzim are waiting for a miracle and bolting our doors every full moon, or tying our criminals to a stake in front of the palace, praying the beast stuffs herself and returns to her sarcophagus.'

'Not a bad method,' the witcher smiled. 'Are there fewer criminals?'

'Not a bit of it.'

'Which way to the palace, the new one?'

'I will take you myself. And what about the wise men's sug- gestion?'

'Castellan,' said Geralt, 'why act in haste? After all, I really could have an accident at work, irrespective of my intentions. Just in case, the wise men should be thinking about how to save me from the king's anger and get those fifteen hundred orens, of which rumour speaks, ready.'

'It was to be a thousand.'

'No, Lord Velerad,' the witcher said categorically. 'The witcher who was offered a thousand ran at the mere sight of the striga, without bargaining. So the risk is greater than a thousand. Whether it is greater than one and a half remains to be seen. Of course, I will say goodbye beforehand.'

'Geralt?' Velerad scratched his head. 'One thousand two hun- dred?'

'No. This isn't an easy task. The king is offering three, and sometimes it's easier to lift a spell than to kill. But one of my predecessors would have done so, or killed the striga, if this were simple. You think they let themselves be devoured out of fear of the king?'

'Then, witcher,' Velerad nodded wistfully, 'our agreement stands. But a word of advice – say nothing to the king about the danger of an accident at work.

III

Foltest was slim and had a pretty – too pretty – face. He was under forty, the witcher thought. The king was sitting on a dwarf- armchair carved from black wood, his legs stretched out toward the hearth, where two dogs were warming themselves. Next to him on a chest sat an older, powerfully-built man with a beard. Behind the king stood another man, richly dressed and with a proud look on his face. A magnate.

'A witcher from Rivia,' said the king after the moment's silence which fell after Velerad's introduction.

'Yes, your Majesty.' Geralt lowered his head.

'What made your hair so grey? Magic? I can see that you are not old. That was a joke. Say nothing. You've had a fair amount of experience, I dare presume?'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'I would love to hear about it.'

Geralt bowed even lower. 'Your Majesty, you know our code of practice forbids us to speak of our work.'

'A convenient code, witcher, very convenient. But tell me, have you had anything to do with spriggans?'

'Yes.'

'Vampires, leshys?'

'Those too.'

Foltest hesitated.

'Strigas?'

Geralt raised his head, looking the king in the eyes.

'Yes.'

Foltest turned his eyes away.

'Velerad!'

'Yes, Gracious Majesty?'

'Have you given him the details?'

'Yes, your Gracious Majesty. He says the spell cast on the princess can be reversed.'

'I have known that for a long time. How, witcher? Oh, of course, I forgot. Your code of practice. All right. I will make one small comment. Several witchers have been here already. Velerad, you have told him? Good. So I know that your speciality is to kill, rather than to reverse spells. This isn't an option. If one hair falls from my daughter's head, your head will be on the block. That is all. Ostrit, Lord Segelen, stay and give him all the information he requires. Witchers always ask a lot of questions. Feed him and let him stay in the palace. He is not to drift from tavern to tavern.'

The king rose, whistled to his dogs and made his way to the door, scattering the straw covering the chamber floor. At the door he paused.

'If you succeed, witcher, the reward is yours. Maybe I will add something if you do well. Of course, the nonsense spread by common folk about marrying the princess carries not a word of truth. I'm sure you don't believe I would give my daughter's hand to a stranger?'

'No, your Majesty. I don't.'

'Good. That shows you have some wisdom.'

Foltest left, closing the door behind him. Velerad and the magnate, who had been standing all the while, immediately sat at the table. The castellan finished the king's half-full cup, peered into the jug and cursed. Ostrit, who took Foltest's chair, scowled at the witcher while he stroked the carved armrests. Segelin, the bearded man, nodded at Geralt.

'Do sit, witcher, do sit. Supper will soon be served. What would you like to know? Castellan Velerad has probably already told you everything. I know him, he has sooner told you too much than too little.'

'Only a few questions.'

'Ask.'

'The castellan said that, after the striga's appearance, the king called up many Knowing Ones.'

'That's right. But don't say striga, say princess. It makes it easier to avoid making a mistake in the king's presence – and any consequent unpleasantness.'

'Was there anyone well-known among the Knowing Ones? Anyone famous?'

'There were such, then and later. I don't remember the names. Do you, Lord Ostrit?'

'I don't recall,' said the magnate. 'But I know some of them enjoyed fame and recognition. There was much talk of it.'

'Were they in agreement that the spell can be lifted?' 'They were far from any agreement,' smiled Segelin, 'on any

subject. But such an opinion was expressed. It was supposed to be simple, not even requiring magical abilities. As I understand it, it would suffice for someone to spend the night – from sunset to the third crowing of the cock – by the sarcophagus.'

'Simple indeed,' snorted Velerad.

'I would like to hear a description of the... the princess.'

Velerad leapt up from his chair. 'The princess looks like a striga!' he yelled. 'Like the most strigish striga I have heard of! Her Royal Highness, the cursed royal bastard, is four cubits high, shaped like a barrel of beer, has a maw which stretches from ear to ear and is full of dagger-like teeth, has red eyes and a red mop of hair! Her paws, with claws like a wild cat's, hang down to the ground! I'm surprised we've yet to send her likeness to friendly courts! The princess, plague choke her, is already fourteen. Time to think of giving her hand to a prince in marriage!'

'Hold on, Velerad,' frowned Ostrit, glancing at the door. Segelin smiled faintly.

'The description, although vivid, is reasonably accurate, and that's what you wanted, isn't it, witcher? Velerad didn't mention that the princess moves with incredible speed and is far stronger for her height and build than one would expect. And she is fourteen years old, if that is of any importance.'

'It is,' said the witcher. 'Do the attacks on people only occur during the full moon?'

'Yes,' replied Segelin, 'if she attacks beyond the old palace. Within the palace walls people always die, irrespective of the moon's phase. But she only ventures out during the full moon, and not always then.'

'Has there been even one attack during the day?' 'No.'

'Does she always devour her victims?'

Velerad spat vehemently on the straw.

'Come on, Geralt, it'll be supper soon. Pish! Devours, takes a bite, leaves aside, it varies – according to her mood, no doubt. She only bit the head from one, gutted a couple, and a few more she picked clean to the bone, sucked them dry, you could say. Damned mother's—!' 'Careful, Velerad,' snarled Ostrit. 'Say what you want about the striga but do not insult Adda in front of me, as you would not

dare in the king's presence!'

'Has anyone she's attacked survived?' The witcher asked, appar- ently paying no special attention to the magnate's outburst.

Segelin and Ostrit looked at each other.

'Yes,' said the bearded man. 'At the very beginning, seven years ago, she threw herself at two soldiers standing guard over the crypt. One escaped'

'And then,' interrupted Velerad, 'there was another, the miller she attacked near the town. You remember?'

IV

The following day, late in the evening, the miller was brought to the small chamber above the guardhouse allocated to the witcher. He was led in by a soldier in a hooded coat.

The conversation did not yield any significant results. The miller was terrified; he mumbled and stammered, and his scars told the witcher more than he did. The striga could open her jaws impressively wide and had extremely sharp teeth, including very long upper fangs – four of them, two on each side. Her claws were sharper than a wildcat's, but less curved. And it was only because of that the miller had managed to tear himself away.

Having finished his examination Geralt nodded to the miller and soldier, dismissing them. The soldier pushed the peasant through the door and lowered his hood. It was Foltest himself.

'Sit, do not get up,' said the king. 'This visit is unofficial. Are you happy with the interview? I heard you were at the palace this morning.'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'When will you set about your task?'

'It is four days until the full moon. After that.' 'You prefer to have a look at her yourself beforehand?'

'There is no need. But having had her fill the— the princess will be less active.'

'Striga, master witcher, striga. Let us not play at diplomacy. She will be a princess afterwards. And that is what I have come to talk about. Answer me unofficially, briefly and clearly: will it work or not? Don't hide behind your code.'

Geralt rubbed his brow.

'I confirm, your Majesty, that the spell might be reversed. And, unless I am mistaken, it can be done by spending the night at the palace. The third crowing of the cock, as long as it catches the striga outside her sarcophagus, will end the spell. That is what is usually done with strigas.'

'So simple?'

'It is not simple. First you have to survive the night. Then there are exceptions

to the rule, for example, not one night but three. Consecutively. There are also cases which are... well...hopeless.'

'Yes,' Foltest bristled. 'I keep hearing that from some people. Kill the monster because it's an incurable case. Master witcher, I am sure they have already spoken to you. Am I right? Hack the man-eater to death without any more fuss, at the beginning, and tell the king nothing else could be done. I won't pay, but they will. Very convenient. And cheap. Because the king will order the witcher beheaded or hanged and the gold will remain in their pockets.'

'The king unconditionally orders the witcher to be beheaded?' Geralt grimaced.

Foltest looked the Rivian in the eyes for a long while. 'The king does not know,' he finally said. 'But the witcher should bear such an eventuality in mind.'

Geralt was silent for a moment.

'I intend to do what is in my power,' he said. 'But if it goes badly I will defend my life. Your Majesty, you must also be prepared for such an eventuality.'

Foltest got up.

'You do not understand me. It's obvious you'll kill her if it becomes necessary, whether I like it or not. Because otherwise she'll kill you, surely and inevitably. I won't punish anyone who kills her in self-defence. But I will not allow her to be killed without trying to save her. There have already been attempts to set fire to the old palace. They shot at her with arrows, dug pits and set traps and snares, until I hung a few of her attackers. But that is not the point. Witcher, listen!'

'I'm listening.'

'After the third crowing of the cock, there will be no striga, if I understand correctly. What will there be?'

'If all goes well, a fourteen-year-old girl.'

'With red eyes? Crocodile's teeth?'

'A normal fourteen-year-old. Except that...'

'Well?'

'Physically.'

'I see. And mentally? Every day, a bucket of blood for breakfast? A little girl's thigh?'

'No. Mentally... There is no telling. On the level, I think, of a three- or four-year-old child. She'll require loving care for a long while.'

'That's obvious. Witcher?'

'I'm listening.'

'Can it happen to her again? Later on?'

Geralt was silent.

'Aha,' said the king. 'It can. And what then?'

'Should she die after a long swoon lasting several days, her body will have to be burned. Quickly.'

Foltest grew gloomy.

'I do not think it will come to that,' added Geralt. 'Just to be sure, I will give you some instructions, your Majesty, to lessen the danger.'

'Right now? Is it not too soon, master witcher? And if...'

'Right now,' interrupted the Rivian. 'Many things may happen,

your Majesty. It could be that you'll find a princess in the morning, the spell already broken, and my corpse.'

'Even so? Despite my permission to defend yourself? Which, it seems, wasn't that important to you.'

'This is a serious matter, your Majesty. The risk is great. That is why you must listen: the princess should always wear a sapphire around her neck, or better, an inclusion, on a silver chain. Day and night.'

'What is an inclusion?'

'A sapphire with a pocket of air trapped within the stone. Aside from that, every now and then you should burn juniper, broom and aspen in the fireplace of her chamber.'

Foltest grew pensive.

'I thank you for your advice, witcher. I will pay heed if... And now listen to me carefully. If you find the case is hopeless, kill her. If you undo the spell but the girl is not... normal. If you have a shadow of a doubt as

to whether you have been entirely successful, kill her. Do not worry, you have nothing to fear from me. I'll shout at you in front of others, banish you from the palace and the town, nothing more. Of course I won't give you the reward, but maybe you'll manage to negotiate something from you know who.'

They were both quiet for a while.

'Geralt.' For the first time Foltest called the witcher by his name.

'Yes.'

'How much truth is there in the rumour that the child is as she is because Adda was my sister?'

'Not much. A spell has to be cast, they don't cast themselves. But I think your congress with your sister was the reason the spell was cast, and this is the result.'

'As I thought. That is what some of the Knowing Ones said, although not all of them. Geralt? Where do such things come from? Spells, magic?'

'I don't know, your Majesty. Knowing Ones study the causes of such phenomena. For us witchers the knowledge that con- centrated will can cause such phenomena is enough. That and the knowledge to fight them.'

'And kill them?'

'Usually. Besides, that is what we're usually paid for. Only a few demand the reversal of spells, your Majesty. As a rule, people simply want to defend themselves from danger. If the monster has men on its conscience then revenge can also come into play.'

The king got up, took a few paces across the chamber, and stopped in front of the witcher's sword hanging on the wall.

'With this?' he asked, not looking at Geralt.

'No. That is for men.'

'So I heard. Do you know what, Geralt? I'm going to the crypt with you.'

'Out of the question.'

Foltest turned, his eyes glinted.

'Do you know, sorcerer, that I have not seen her? Neither after she was

born, nor later. I was afraid. I may never see her, am I not right? At least I have the right to see my daughter while you're murdering her.'

'I repeat, it's out of the question. It is certain death. For me as well as you. If my attention, my will falters... No, your Majesty.'

Foltest turned away, started towards the door. For a moment Geralt thought he would leave without a word, without a parting gesture, but the king stopped and looked at him.

'You inspire trust,' he said, 'although I know what a rogue you are. I was told what happened at the tavern. I'm sure you killed those thugs solely for word to spread, to shock people, to shock me. It's obvious that you could have dealt with them without killing. I'm afraid I'll never know whether you are going there to save my daughter, or to kill her. But I agree to it. I have to agree. Do you know why?'

Geralt did not reply.

'Because I think,' said the king, 'I think that she is suffering. Am I not right?'

The witcher fixed his penetrating eyes on the king. He didn't confirm it, didn't nod, didn't make the slightest gesture, but Foltest knew. He knew the answer.

V

Geralt looked out of the palace window for the last time. Dusk was falling rapidly. Beyond the lake the distant lights of Wyzim twinkled. There was a wilderness around the old palace – a strip of no-man's land with which, over seven years, the town had cut itself off from this dangerous place, leaving nothing but a few ruins, rotten beams and the remains of a gap-toothed palisade which had obviously not been worth dismantling and moving. As far away as possible – at the opposite end of the settlement – the king had built his new residence. The stout tower of his new palace loomed black in the distance, against the darkening blue of the sky.

In one of the empty, plundered chambers, the witcher returned to the dusty table at which he was preparing, calmly and meticu- lously. He knew he had plenty of time. The striga would not leave her crypt before midnight.

On the table in front of him he had a small chest with metal fittings. He opened it. Inside, packed tightly in compartments lined with dried grass, stood small vials of dark glass. The witcher removed three.

From the floor, he picked up an oblong packet thickly wrapped in sheep's skins and fastened with a leather strap. He unwrapped it and pulled out a sword with an elaborate hilt, in a black, shiny scabbard covered with rows of runic signs and symbols. He drew the blade, which lit up with a pure shine of mirror-like brightness. It was pure silver.

Geralt whispered an incantation and drank, one after the other, the contents of two vials, placing his left hand on the blade of the sword after each sip. Then, wrapping himself tightly in his black coat, he sat down on the floor. There were no chairs in the chamber, or in the rest of the palace.

He sat motionless, his eyes closed. His breathing, at first even, suddenly quickened, became rasping and tense. And then stopped completely. The mixture which helped the witcher gain full control of his body was chiefly made up of veratrum, stramonium, hawthorn and spurge. The other ingredients had no name in any human language. For anyone

who was not, like Geralt, inured to it from childhood, it would have been lethal poison.

The witcher turned his head abruptly. In the silence his hearing, sharpened beyond measure, easily picked out a rustle of footsteps through the courtyard overgrown with stinging nettles. It could not be the striga. The steps were too light. Geralt threw his sword across his back, hid his bundle in the hearth of the ruined chimney- place and, silent as a bat, ran downstairs.

It was still light enough in the courtyard for the approaching man to see the witcher's face. The man, Ostrit, backed away abruptly; an involuntary grimace of terror and repulsion contorted his lips. The witcher smiled wryly – he knew what he looked like. After drinking a mixture of banewart, monk's hood and eyebright the face takes on the colour of chalk, and the pupils fill the entire iris. But the mixture enables one to see in the deepest darkness, and this is what Geralt wanted.

Ostrit quickly regained control.

'You look as if you were already a corpse, witcher,' he said. 'From fear, no doubt. Don't be afraid. I bring you reprieve.'

The witcher did not reply.

'Don't you hear what I say, you Rivian charlatan? You're saved.

And rich.' Ostrit hefted a sizeable purse in his hand and threw it at Geralt's feet. 'A thousand orens. Take it, get on your horse and get out of here!'

The Rivian still said nothing.

'Don't gawp at me!' Ostrit raised his voice. 'And don't waste my time. I have no intention of standing here until midnight. Don't you understand? I do not wish you to undo the spell. No, you haven't guessed. I am not in league with Velerad and Segelin. I don't want you to kill her. You are simply to leave. Everything is to stay as it is.'

The witcher did not move. He did not want the magnate to realise how fast his movements and reactions now were. It was quickly growing dark. A relief, as even the semi-darkness of dusk was too bright for his dilated pupils.

'And why, sir, is everything to remain as it is?' he asked, trying to enunciate each word slowly.

‘Now, that,’ Ostrit raised his head proudly, ‘should really be of damn little concern to you.’

‘And what if I already know?’ ‘Go on.’

‘It will be easier to remove Foltest from the throne if the striga frightens the people even more? If the royal madness completely disgusts both magnates and common folk, am I right? I came here by way of Redania and Novigrad. There is much talk there that there are those in Wyzim who look to King Vizimir as their saviour and true monarch. But I, Lord Ostrit, do not care about politics, or the successions to thrones, or revolutions in palaces. I am here to accomplish my task. Have you never heard of a sense of responsibility and plain honesty? About professional ethics?’

‘Careful to whom you speak, you vagabond!’ Ostrit yelled furiously, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘I have had enough of this. I am not accustomed to hold such discussions! Look at you – ethics, codes of practice, morality?! Who are you to talk? A brigand who’s barely arrived before he starts murdering men? Who bends double to Foltest and behind his back bargains with Velerad like a hired thug? And you dare to turn your nose up at me, you serf? Play at being a Knowing One? A Magician? You scheming witcher! Be gone before I run the flat of my sword across your gob!’

The witcher did not stir. He stood calmly.

‘You’d better leave, Lord Ostrit,’ he said. ‘It’s growing dark.’

Ostrit took a step back, drew his sword in a flash.

‘You asked for this, you sorcerer. I’ll kill you. Your tricks won’t help you. I carry a turtle-stone.’

Geralt smiled. The reputation of turtle-stone was as mistaken as it was popular. But the witcher was not going to lose his strength on spells, much less expose his silver sword to contact with Ostrit’s blade. He dived under the whirling blade and, with the heel of his hand and his silver-studded cuff, hit him in the temple.

VI

Ostrit quickly regained consciousness and looked around in the total darkness. He noticed that he was tied up. He did not see Geralt standing right beside him. But he realised where he was and let out a prolonged, terrifying howl.

'Keep quiet,' said the witcher. 'Otherwise you'll lure her out before her time.'

'You damned murderer! Where are you? Untie me immediately, you louse! You'll hang for this, you son-of-a-bitch!'

'Quiet.'

Ostrit panted heavily.

'You're leaving me here to be devoured by her! Tied up?' he asked, quieter now, whispering a vile invective.

'No,' said the witcher. 'I'll let you go. But not now.'

'You scoundrel,' hissed Ostrit. 'To distract the striga?'

'Yes.'

Ostrit didn't say anything. He stopped wriggling and lay quietly.

'Witcher?'

'Yes.'

'It's true that I wanted to overthrow Foltest. I'm not the only one. But I am the only one who wanted him dead. I wanted him to die in agony, to go mad, to rot alive. Do you know why?'

Geralt remained silent.

'I loved Adda. The king's sister. The king's mistress. The king's trollop. I loved her— Witcher, are you there?'

'I am.'

'I know what you're thinking. But it wasn't like that. Believe me, I didn't cast any spells. I don't know anything about magic. Only once in anger did I say... Only once. Witcher? Are you listening?'

'I am.'

'It's his mother, the old queen. It must be her. She couldn't watch him and Adda— It wasn't me. I only once, you know, tried to persuade them but Adda— Witcher! I was besotted, and said ...Witcher? Was it me? Me?'

'It doesn't matter anymore.'

'Witcher? Is it nearly midnight?' 'It's close.'

'Let me go. Give me more time.'

'No.'

Ostrit did not hear the scrape of the tomb lid being moved aside, but the witcher did. He leant over and, with his dagger, cut the magnate's bonds. Ostrit did not wait for the word. He jumped up, numb, hobbled clumsily, and ran. His eyes had grown accus- tomed enough to the darkness for him to see his way from the main hall to the exit.

The slab blocking the entrance to the crypt opened and fell to the floor with a thud. Geralt, prudently behind the staircase balustrade, saw the misshapen figure of the striga speeding swiftly and unerringly in the direction of Ostrit's receeding footsteps. Not the slightest sound issued from the striga.

A terrible, quivering, frenzied scream tore the night, shook the old walls, continued rising and falling, vibrating. The witcher couldn't make out exactly how far away it was – his sharpened hearing deceived him – but he knew that the striga had caught up with Ostrit quickly. Too quickly.

He stepped into the middle of the hall, stood right at the entrance to the crypt. He threw down his coat, twitched his shoulders, adjusted the position of his sword, pulled on his gaunt- lets. He still had some time. He knew that the striga, although well fed after the last full moon, would not readily abandon Ostrit's corpse. The heart and liver were, for her, valuable reserves of nutrition for the long periods spent in lethargic sleep.

The witcher waited. By his count, there were about three hours left until dawn. The cock's crow could only mislead him. Besides, there were probably no cocks in the neighbourhood.

He heard her. She was trudging slowly, shuffling along the floor. And then he saw her.

The description had been accurate. The disproportionately large head set on a short neck was surrounded by a tangled, curly halo of reddish hair. Her eyes shone in the darkness like an animal's. The striga stood motionless, her gaze fixed on Geralt. Suddenly she opened her jaws – as if proud of her rows of pointed white teeth – then snapped them shut with a crack like a chest being closed. And leapt, slashing at the witcher with her bloodied claws.

Geralt jumped to the side, spun a swift pirouette. The striga rubbed against him, also spun around, slicing through the air with her talons. She didn't lose her balance and attacked anew, mid- spin, gnashing her teeth fractions of an inch from Geralt's chest. The Rivian jumped away, changing the direction of his spin with a fluttering pirouette to confuse the striga. As he leapt away he dealt a hard blow to the side of her head with the silver spikes studding the knuckles of his gauntlet.

The striga roared horribly, filling the palace with a booming echo, fell to the ground, froze and started to howl hollowly and furiously.

The witcher smiled maliciously. His first attempt, as he had hoped, had gone well. Silver was fatal to the striga, as it was for most monsters brought into existence through magic. So there was a chance: the beast was like the others, and that boded well for lifting the spell, while the silver sword would, as a last resort, assure his life.

The striga was in no hurry with her next attack. She approached slowly, baring her fangs, dribbling repulsively. Geralt backed away and, carefully placing his feet, traced a semi-circle. By slowing and quickening his movements he distracted the striga, making it difficult for her to leap. As he walked the witcher unwound a long, strong silver chain, weighted at the end.

The moment the striga tensed and leapt the chain whistled through the air and, coiling like a snake, twined itself around the monster's shoulders, neck and head. The striga's jump became a tumble, and she let out an ear-piercing whistle. She thrashed around on the floor, howling horribly with fury or from the burning pain inflicted by the despised metal. Geralt was content – if he

wanted he could kill the striga without great difficulty. But the witcher did not draw his sword. Nothing in the striga's behaviour had given him reason to think she might be an incurable case. Geralt moved to a safer distance and, without letting the writhing shape on the floor out of his sight, breathed deeply, focused himself.

The chain snapped. The silver links scattered like rain in all directions, ringing against the stone. The striga, blind with fury, tumbled to the attack, roaring. Geralt waited calmly and, with his raised right hand, traced the Sign of Aard in front of him.

The striga fell back as if hit by a mallet but kept her feet, extended her talons, bared her fangs. Her hair stood on end and fluttered as if she were walking against a fierce wind. With difficulty, one rasping step at a time, she slowly advanced. But she did advance.

Geralt grew uneasy. He did not expect such a simple Sign to paralyse the striga entirely but neither did he expect the beast to overcome it so easily. He could not hold the Sign for long, it was too exhausting, and the striga had no more than ten steps to go. He lowered the Sign suddenly, and sprung aside. The striga, taken by surprise, flew forward, lost her balance, fell, slid along the floor and tumbled down the stairs into the crypt's entrance, yawning in the floor. Her infernal scream reverberated from below.

To gain time Geralt jumped on to the stairs leading to the gallery. He had not even climbed halfway up when the striga ran out of the crypt, speeding along like an enormous black spider. The witcher waited until she had run up the stairs after him, then leapt over the balustrade. The striga turned on the stairs, sprang and flew at him in an amazing ten-metre leap. She did not let herself be deceived by his pirouettes this time; twice her talons left their mark on the Rivian's leather tunic. But another desperately hard blow from the silver spiked gauntlet threw the striga aside, shook her. Geralt, feeling fury building inside him, swayed, bent backwards and, with a mighty kick, knocked the beast off her legs.

The roar she gave was louder than all the previous ones. Even the plaster crumbled from the ceiling.

The striga sprang up, shaking with uncontrolled anger and lust for murder. Geralt waited. He drew his sword, traced circles with it in the air, and skirted the striga, taking care that the movement of his sword was not in rhythm with his steps. The striga did not jump. She approached slowly, following the bright streak of the blade with her eyes.

Geralt stopped abruptly, froze with his sword raised. The striga, disconcerted, also stopped. The witcher traced a slow semi-circle with the blade, took a step in the striga's direction. Then another. Then he leapt, feigning a whirling movement with his sword above her head.

The striga curled up, retreated in a zigzag. Geralt was close again, the blade shimmering in his hand. His eyes lit up with an ominous glow, a hoarse roar tore through his clenched teeth. The striga backed away, pushed by the power of concentrated hatred, anger and violence which emanated from the attacking man and struck her in waves, penetrating her mind and body. Terrified and pained by feelings unknown to her she let out a thin, shaking squeak, turned on the spot and ran off in a desperate, crazy escape down the dark tangle of the palace's corridors.

Geralt stood quivering in the middle of the hall. Alone. It had taken a long time, he thought, before this dance on the edge of an abyss, this mad, macabre ballet of a fight, had achieved the desired effect, allowed him to psychically become one with his opponent, to reach the underlayers of concentrated will which permeated the striga. The evil, twisted will from which the striga was born. The witcher shivered at the memory of taking on that evil to redirect it, as if in a mirror, against the monster. Never before had he come across such a concentration of hatred and murderous frenzy, not even from basilisks, who enjoyed a ferocious reputation for it.

All the better, he thought as he walked toward the crypt entrance and the blackness that spread from it like an enormous puddle. All the better, all the stronger, was the blow received by the striga. This would give him a little

more time until the beast recovered from the shock. The witcher doubted whether he could repeat such an effort. The elixirs were weakening and it was still a long time until dawn. But the striga could not return to her crypt before first light, or all his trouble would come to nothing.

He went down the stairs. The crypt was not large; there was room for three stone sarcophagi. The slab covering the first was half pushed aside. Geralt pulled the third vial from beneath his tunic, quickly drank its contents, climbed into the tomb and stretched out in it. As he had expected, it was a double tomb – for mother and daughter.

He had only just pulled the cover closed when he heard the striga's roar again. He lay on his back next to Adda's mummified corpse and traced the Sign of Yrden on the inside of the slab. He laid his sword on his chest, stood a tiny hourglass filled with phosphorescent sand next to it and crossed his arms. He no longer heard the striga's screams as she searched the palace. He had gradually stopped hearing anything as the true-love and celandine began to work.

VII

When Geralt opened his eyes the sand had passed through the hourglass, which meant his sleep had been even longer than he had intended. He pricked up his ears, and heard nothing. His senses were now functioning normally.

He took hold of his sword and, murmuring an incantation, ran his hand across the lid of the sarcophagus. He then moved the slab slightly, a couple of inches.

Silence.

He pushed the lid further, sat, holding his weapon at the ready, and lifted his head above the tomb. The crypt was dark but the witcher knew that outside dawn was breaking. He struck a light, lit a miniature lamp and lifted it, throwing strange shadows across the walls of the crypt.

It was empty.

He scrambled from the sarcophagus, aching, numb, cold. And then he saw her. She was lying on her back next to the tomb, naked and unconscious.

She was rather ugly. Slim with small pointed breasts, and dirty. Her hair – flaxen-red – reached almost to her waist. Standing the lamp on the slab he knelt beside her and leant over. Her lips were pale and her face was bloody where he had hit her cheekbone. Geralt removed his gloves, put his sword aside and, without any fuss, drew up her top lip with his finger. Her teeth were normal. He reached for her hand which was buried in her tangled hair. Before he took it he saw her open eyes. Too late.

She swiped him across the neck with her talons, cutting him deeply. Blood splashed on to her face. She howled, striking him in the eyes with her other hand. He fell on her, grabbing her by the wrists, nailing her to the floor. She gnashed her teeth – which were now too short – in front of his face. He butted her in the face with his forehead and pinned her down harder. She had lost her former strength; she could only writhe beneath him, howling, spitting out blood – his blood – which was pouring over her mouth. His blood was draining away quickly. There was no time. The witcher cursed and bit her hard on the neck, just below the ear. He dug his teeth in and clenched them until

her inhuman howling became a thin, despairing scream and then a choking sob – the cry of a hurt fourteen-year-old girl.

He let her go when she stopped moving, got to his knees, tore a piece of canvas from his sleeve pocket and pressed it to his neck. He felt for his sword, held the blade to the unconscious girl's throat, and leant over her hand. The nails were dirty, broken, bloodied but . . . normal. Completely normal.

The witcher got up with difficulty. The sticky-wet greyness of early morning was flooding in through the crypt's entrance. He made a move towards the stairs but staggered and sat down heavily on the floor. Blood was pouring through the drenched canvas onto his hands, running down his sleeve. He unfastened his tunic, slit his shirt, tore and ripped rags from it and tied them around his neck, knowing that he didn't have much time, that he would soon faint...

He succeeded. And fainted.

In Wyzim, beyond the lake, a cock, ruffling his feathers in the cold damp, crowed hoarsely for the third time.

VIII

He saw the whitened walls and beamed ceiling of the small chamber above the guardroom. He moved his head, grimacing with pain, and moaned. His neck was bandaged, thickly, thoroughly, professionally.

'Lie still, witcher,' said Velerad. 'Lie, do not move.'

'My... sword...'

'Yes, yes. Of course, what is most important is your witcher's silver sword. It's here, don't worry. Both the sword and your little trunk. And the three thousand orens. Yes, yes, don't utter a word. It is I who am an old fool and you the wise witcher. Foltest has been repeating it over and over for the last two days.'

'Two...'

'Oh yes, two. She slit your neck open quite thoroughly. One could see everything you have inside there. You lost a great deal of blood. Fortunately we hurried to the palace straight after the third crowing of the cock. Nobody slept in Wyzim that night. It was impossible, you made a terrible noise. Does my talking tire you?'

'The prin... cess?'

'The princess is like a princess. Thin. And somewhat dull- witted. She weeps incessantly and wets her bed. But Foltest says this will change. I don't think it'll change for the worse, do you, Geralt?'

The witcher closed his eyes.

'Good. I take my leave now. Rest.' Velerad got up. 'Geralt? Before I go, tell me: why did you try to bite her to death? Eh? Geralt?'

The witcher was asleep.